

COVID-19 and breastfeeding

Position paper

Breastmilk is the best source of nutrition for infants, including infants whose mothers have confirmed or suspected coronavirus infection. As long as an infected mother takes appropriate precautions—outlined below—she can breastfeed her baby. Breastmilk contains antibodies and other immunological benefits that can help protect against respiratory diseases. A growing body of evidence supports the importance of breastfeeding for a child's growth, development, and health, as well as for helping them avoid obesity and noncommunicable diseases later in life.

What is the risk for breastfed infants?

To date, the virus that causes COVID-19 has not been detected in breastmilk. However, as the disease is new, this evidence is based on limited studies. Public health officials are continuing to learn about how the virus spreads and what kind of risks it poses to infants whose mothers have the disease. In limited studies among women with COVID-19 and another coronavirus infection (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, SARs-CoV), the virus was not detected in breastmilk. In a recent study from Wuhan, China, researchers collected and tested breastmilk samples (at first lactation) from six patients who had COVID-19 during pregnancy; all samples tested negative for the virus. However, more research is needed to confirm these results. Of importance, the experience obtained so far shows that the disease course of COVID-19 generally is not severe in infants and young children. The main risk of transmission appears to come from the respiratory tract of an infected mother.

How can the risk be managed?

WHO's current guidance is that women with COVID-19 can breastfeed if they wish to do so, but they should take precautions, including:

1. Practicing respiratory hygiene during feeding, including wearing a mask covering mouth and nose.
2. Washing hands with soap and water for 20 seconds before and after touching the baby.
3. Routinely cleaning and disinfecting surfaces they have touched.

Close contact with the mother and early, exclusive breastfeeding are both things that help babies thrive. So even if a mother has COVID-19, she is encouraged to touch and hold her baby, breastfeed safely with good respiratory hygiene, hold the baby skin-to-skin, and share a room with the child. In general, WHO recommends that mothers exclusively breastfeed their infants for the first six months of life. Thereafter, mothers should both breastfeed and give the child nutritious and healthy foods up to the age of two years and even beyond.

What to do if the mother is too ill to breastfeed?

If a mother is too unwell to breastfeed her baby due to COVID-19, she should receive support for safely giving her baby breastmilk via other means, including **expressing milk, relactation** (the process of resuming breastfeeding after a period of no breastfeeding or very little breastfeeding), or the use of **donor human milk from certified milk banks**.

For more information, visit the WHO website: <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-on-covid-19-pregnancy-childbirth-and-breastfeeding>

